**Prepared Statement of Dr. Susan Kaufman Purcell**
**Director, Center for Hemispheric Policy**
**University of Miami**

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Democracy has made great strides in Latin America during the past two decades. All the countries of the region have democratically-elected leaders, with the exception of Cuba. The electoral processes that brought them to power are more transparent and free from fraud than ever before. The press is also largely free. Military establishments retain varying degrees of political influence but have refrained from overturning elected governments whose policies or behavior they dislike. Political parties have become more pragmatic and less ideological and a greater percentage of the voting-age population is now participating in the democratic political process.

Continued democratic progress in Latin America, however, is far from assured. Many of the region's democracies remain fragile and weakly institutionalized. Corruption at all levels of government continues to erode democratic legitimacy. The political accountability of elected officials is weak and the rule of law is largely absent. Legislatures are politically fragmented, making the passage of needed reforms difficult, if not impossible. Most disturbing is the fact that too many of the region's inhabitants question the ability of democracy to provide them with the services they need to improve their standard of living, such as jobs, education and personal security.

Although the future of Latin America's democracies remains unclear, one

encouraging development has been the decline of military coups against elected governments. In the past, when democratic governments were stalemated or proved unable to maintain control over unhappy, mobilized portions of the population, the military would take and retain power until they were satisfied that civilians could once again be trusted to govern. Often, these military coups were supported or encouraged by middle- and upper-class groups who believed that the military was more qualified than civilians to govern. As Latin America became more developed and its people more educated, this justification for military rule began to disappear. Disillusionment with military rule also resulted from excesses committed by military governments, as well as from efforts by the United States and other industrialized democracies to strengthen democratic institutions and processes.

Although military coups are no longer the norm, they unfortunately have been replaced by "civilian coups" that constitute a marginal improvement but remain both an indication of democratic fragility and a threat to the institutionalization of democracy in the region. In civilian coups the elected president is forced from office, not as a result of military force but as a result of the threat of mass violence. Fernando de la Rua in Argentina, Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada and Carlos Mesa in Bolivia and Lucio Gutierrez in Ecuador were removed as a result of this process. In each of these cases, the departing president was succeeded by his constitutionally-designated successor.

It can be argued that civilian coups against authoritarian regimes, such as occurred in Ukraine, advance democracy. It is more problematic to claim that they have the same effect when they are directed against democratically-elected presidents. The

reality is that civilian coups in Latin America are a serious indication that democracy is in trouble in those countries where they occur.

The leaders of most of the civilian coups that have occurred in Latin America claim to represent groups that are marginalized politically and economically and have been encouraged by these leaders to take direct action against the government. In a sense, they represent a new form of populism. After civilian coups succeed, their leaders use their success as the basis for a run at the presidency. This is what is happening today in Bolivia. Evo Morales, who helped oust Sanchez de Lozada from office, could be the next elected president of Bolivia. This is worrisome since he has made clear his dislike and contempt for the United States and market economies and shows signs of authoritarian political leanings, despite his eagerness to use the electoral system to further his presidential ambitions.

The Venezuelan case is somewhat different, in that Hugo Chavez, unlike Evo Morales, first attempted a traditional military coup. When his attempt failed, he was nevertheless able to portray his effort as aimed toward toppling a corrupt political class that kept Venezuela's oil wealth for itself instead of sharing it with the poor. Chavez then decided to use the electoral system to win the presidency and subsequently used democratic rules of the game to concentrate ever more power in his own hands.

Civilian coups, whether engineered by autocratic populist opposition leaders or incumbent presidents who use democratic processes to undermine democracy, constitute serious challenges for the future of democracy in Latin America and for U.S. policy

toward the region. They are more complicated to deal with than outright military coups because they blur the line between democracy and authoritarianism and therefore have more democratic legitimacy than regimes based on traditional military coups. Their legitimacy is further enhanced by their promise to create a more just and equitable social order.

It is in the interest of the United States to have a democratic Latin America. Stable democracies tend to have peaceful relations with other democracies, are more favorably disposed to economic policies that are conducive to economic growth and development, and are accountable to their populations. Although there were periods during the Cold War when Washington preferred friendly military regimes to unfriendly, weak democratic governments, U.S. policy since the presidency of Jimmy Carter has been strongly supportive of democracy in Latin America.

Washington's pro-democracy policies have generally focused on strengthening democratic institutions and processes, as well as market economies. Included in the first category are support for human rights and the promotion of free, fair and transparent electoral processes, as well as efforts to strengthen the rule of law, political parties and independent grass-roots organizations. The second category includes policies supportive of privatization and tax, exchange rate and labor reform, as well as bilateral, regional and hemispheric free trade agreements.

These are all worthwhile policies and were embraced, often enthusiastically, by Latin Americans during the early 1990s. In recent years, however, the economic components of U.S. policy have been increasingly under attack in many parts of the

region for failing to live up to the high expectations that were generated. Specifically, the so-called Washington Consensus is now criticized for failing to produce significant rates of economic growth as well as jobs. The policies are also being blamed for principally benefiting the wealthy, while making the already dire economic situation of the rural and urban poor considerably worse. Many supporters of U.S. policy argue that the problem was not Washington's policies but rather, the failure of Latin American governments to implement a second stage of necessary reforms. This argument, however, has fallen on deaf ears.

Latin America is now polarized over the economic policies supported by Washington, with opponents often linking their arguments to a general anti-globalization ideology. This situation is not good for Latin America or for the United States. In order to reduce the polarization, Washington needs to adjust its free trade message somewhat. Specifically, it must more directly acknowledge that market-friendly policies initially do not, and cannot, benefit everyone, although ultimately they allow a country to prosper. During the transition to more open economies, therefore, supplementary policies and perhaps some kinds of assistance are necessary to level the playing field between those with skills compatible with the new economy and those who need to acquire such skills. This is particularly true in Latin America, where the gap between these two groups is very wide.

This is an area that lends itself to a cooperative effort with Latin America to work out what might be done. A good place to begin is the upcoming Summit of the Americas, which will take place November 4-5 in Mar del Plata, Argentina. Unfortunately, some

of the Argentine officials in charge of the Summit are playing up the split between the United States and Latin America on the globalization/free trade issue. It would be useful for President Bush to join with other Latin American presidents at the Summit in supporting market-friendly policies that have a social component, thereby offering some hope to those who fear such policies.

President Bush could also share some of his thoughts on how the U.S. plans to deal with the devastation caused by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in areas of the United States that share some characteristics with developing countries. His desire to foster independence and initiative on the part of the poor by eschewing bureaucracy and giving aid, vouchers and the like directly to those who need help would generate considerable interest. Mexico and Brazil are already experimenting with anti-poverty programs that give money for food and clothing directly to the mothers of poor children. These programs are not explicitly part of a "compassionate conservative" agenda, but they share some elements of President Bush's approach. They also reflect an effort to avoid the dead weight of bureaucracy, which has plagued Latin America since colonial times.

Interestingly, the majority of Latin American governments may not, in fact, be as opposed to globalization and market economies as the conventional wisdom argues. The region's much touted move to the left does not necessarily mean that most left-of-center leaders agree with Hugo Chavez or Fidel Castro. A recent Zogby poll of Latin American political and economic elites, sponsored by the Miami Herald and the University of Miami's School of Business Administration, found that the Latin American leader most admired by other Latin American leaders is Ricardo Lagos, not Chavez or Castro. Lagos

is the best example in the region of a president who has successfully combined market reforms with socially-conscious policies. Despite being a "man of the left," he is considered a pragmatist rather than an ideologue, in contrast with Chavez and Castro.

If on the economic side U.S. policy needs to better combine market-oriented policies with social ones, the challenge is somewhat different on the political side. Washington has implemented a wide variety of policies aimed at strengthening democratic processes and institutions in Latin America, although the greatest emphasis has been on helping to create free, fair and transparent electoral processes. U.S. policy has been largely successful in this regard, especially on the national level. The problem is that political accountability is still weak and the reforms needed to strengthen it are strongly opposed by vested interests. Electoral districts, for example, are often too large to facilitate communication between elected officials and voters. Elections in which victory or defeat depends on a candidate's place on a party list also reduce accountability and encourage corruption. Minimal requirements for establishing and maintaining political parties encourage political fragmentation and give minority interests too much influence in a fragmented and stalemated political system.

Given the improvement in Latin America's electoral processes, it is time for U.S. policies that support democracy to give greater emphasis to strengthening political accountability and the rule of law. Weaknesses in both these areas continue to seriously undermine popular support for democratic systems in Latin America. They also discourage foreign and domestic investment, hinder the creation of small businesses and in general threaten to undermine much of what Washington has tried to achieve over the

past several decades. The United States can also make a useful contribution to democratic stability and institutionalization by helping Latin American governments establish mechanisms to upgrade the quality of their appointed officials. This involves helping these governments move toward a civil service based more on merit than on political ties. The same holds true for the selection of judges. Ultimately, however, it is the Latin Americans themselves who must decide to fight for the kinds of reforms that will make their democracies more accountable and responsive to the needs of their citizens.

A final way in which Washington can help strengthen Latin American democracy involves the reduction of anti-Americanism in the region. Anti-Americanism tends to weaken U.S. efforts to promote democracy because it produces distrust or the rejection of policies that Latin Americans regard as "in Washington's interest." The fact that these policies are also in the interest of Latin Americans themselves may mitigate these feelings, but not necessarily eradicate them. For this reason, improving U.S.-Latin American relations should be a high priority of the Bush administration.

It will not be easy, however, to make the U.S.-Latin American relationship better during a period when the United States is engaged in a war on terror. Whenever the United States is involved in a global struggle that affects U.S. security interests, Latin America feels ignored. This was true during the Cold War and it is true now. The best period of U.S.-Latin American relations in recent memory occurred during the 1990s, after the Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War ended. The absence of a perceived global security threat allowed Washington to focus on economic issues and pay more

attention to Latin America and its economic development. This pleased the Latin Americans who, like the Europeans, tend to believe that if U.S. policy promotes their economic development, current and future security problems can either be managed or avoided.

Unfortunately, since September 11, 2001, the United States has been engaged in a global struggle to protect its security and not surprisingly, Latin America again feels neglected. The problem is compounded by the Iraq War, which is a preemptive war. Latin America is an area where the United States has already used military force preemptively. As a result, there is a strong fear in the region of preemptive unilateral U.S. military action. The Iraq War, therefore, has revived old fears and anti-American sentiments that had been on the decline or had become dormant.

The United States cannot and should not renounce unilateral military action, preemptive or otherwise, in order to improve its relations with Latin America. But there are other things that Washington can do in the region to diminish hostility toward the United States. Some are matters of style rather than of substance. When Latin Americans are asked what they want from the United States, they frequently answer that they want to be treated with respect. It is not readily apparent what they mean by this, but it often comes down to wanting high-level U.S. officials to meet and consult more frequently with their Latin American counterparts. Since September 11, however, it also refers to the visa issue. Latin Americans trying to enter the United States are often enraged by the way that they are treated. Despite the war on terrorism, which admittedly is a very big complicating factor, the United States needs to improve its handling of visitors, not only

from Latin America but from the rest of the world as well.

Another frequent complaint from Latin America is that much of U.S. policy toward the region serves U.S. rather than Latin American interests. U.S. economic policies oriented toward strengthening market economies and increasing economic integration with the United States are often the target of such charges. The shift suggested earlier in this paper that would add a social component to existing efforts to promote free trade would help ameliorate this problem. President Bush's efforts to achieve a reduction of U.S. and European agricultural tariffs, if successful, would also be useful in this regard.

Also needed, however, is a big improvement in Washington's public diplomacy efforts. Too many Latin Americans are forming their opinions of U.S. policies from sources such as Hugo Chavez, who is hostile to the United States, or from others who have an imperfect understanding of what Washington is trying to achieve. It is essential that Latin Americans be helped to understand why the policies that the United States is supporting strongly serve their interests as well as those of Washington. This does not mean that U.S. officials should rebut every wrong or misleading assertion made about U.S. policy toward the region. Washington's efforts to do this with Hugo Chavez only played into his hands and facilitated his efforts to present himself as a nationalist hero who protects weak Latin America against the U.S. bully. Instead, the United States needs to explain patiently and clearly what it is trying to do in Latin America and why - as many times as necessary.

In conclusion, the overall thrust of U.S. policy toward Latin America is good. Support for democracy and for market economies, including economic integration with the U.S. economy, are policies that are mutually beneficial to the United States and Latin America. Some fine-tuning of the policies, however, is in order. The economic policy in particular needs to be more responsive to the realities facing large numbers of Latin Americans who fear for their livelihoods. This can be done by a public acknowledgement of the problem by U.S. officials, accompanied by efforts to cooperate with Latin American leaders in designing a social component to the economic policy. In the area of support for democracy, Washington should shift its emphasis from elections to political accountability and the rule of law, both of which need strengthening. Finally, the weakening of anti-Americanism should be made an essential part of current and future U.S. policy, since an improved U.S.-Latin American relationship would increase the effectiveness of our overall effort to build a more democratic and prosperous hemisphere.